

EXPLORING THE WORLD

PURPOSE

In today's world, news about places around the globe comes into your home daily through television, radio, newspaper, and the Internet. Much of this news has political, economic, and social implications for the U.S. In order to better understand these events, their origin and their importance, you must learn more about the location of each event. Studying the characteristics of those places, including both their physical and human aspects, will greatly enhance your insight into these events.

This chapter will provide you with a basic overview of world geography from important physical features, natural resources, and climates to political boundaries and other human characteristics that make up the world's diverse landscape. Knowing where places are in relation to each other as well as their differences and similarities will furnish the background information you need to interpret world events. To be an informed citizen of a leading world power and a knowledgeable participant in our global environment, you must possess a broad understanding of the physical world and its human dimensions.

LESSON 1: BEFORE YOU GET STARTED — APPROACHES AND BASIC CONCEPTS



automation
Christian
ethnicity
Hinduism
ideological
Islamic
Judaism
per capita
spatial
tectonic plates

INTRODUCTION

Before embarking on your world exploration, this lesson will investigate the subject of geography and approaches to studying different parts of the world. It will explain the approach taken in this text and the basic concepts you should know as you read this chapter.

WHAT IS GEOGRAPHY?

Geography is the study of the Earth and life on it. It brings together both the physical and human dimensions of the planet, combining earth science (studying the physical makeup or landscape of the environment) with social science (studying humans and their activities within the environment). For this reason, geography encompasses a broad range of subjects, and there are many specialties within the field. The four specialties described below pertain to the aspects of geography that will be discussed in later lessons. Taken together, they will provide you with a **spatial**

perspective of how places and people are organized on the Earth, as well as the characteristics of those places and people.

PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHY

Physical geography focuses on terrain features, climate, soil, vegetation, and natural resources like water supplies and mineral deposits. The following are examples of how the information gathered in the study of physical geography can be applied:

- ⇒ Studying terrain features and determining what forces have created them — for example, mountains and volcanoes created by the movement of **tectonic plates** — can guide predictions on how natural forces will continue to shape the physical landscape in the future.
- ⇒ Studying the impact that climate has on an area helps explain the way people live in that area — for example, the types of crops grown, houses built, and clothes worn all vary depending upon whether an area is wet or dry, hot or cold, etc.
- ⇒ Studying the type of soil, vegetation, and natural resources in an area helps explain the way people make a living there. Economies and standards of living in many areas depend in part on what is supplied naturally to the people in an area — such as rivers to transport goods, coastlines for fishing, and rich soil for agriculture.
- ⇒ Studying the makeup and importance of natural habitats can be used environmentally to understand the effects of and try to minimize human impacts on those habitats.

CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY

Cultural geography focuses on the characteristics of different groups of people, their distribution throughout the world, their relationship to each other, and the historical

developments that resulted in their characteristics and distribution. Understanding the influences of human characteristics, such as culture, language, religion, **ethnicity**, political beliefs, and standards of living, can provide insight into the way different groups of people dress, eat, work, form relationships, support political leaders and governments, treat their environment and other people, etc.

The following two examples demonstrate how religion can impact daily life and certain situations.

- ⇒ Many businesses close on the day of worship associated with the predominant religion of the region — such as Sunday in **Christian** areas and Friday in **Islamic** areas. Knowing this type of information is important when traveling or doing business in different parts of the world. Will a bank be open when you need to exchange money? If you need to call a branch of a company in another country, what days should you call?
- ⇒ Islam and **Judaism** forbid eating pork. Therefore, in many predominantly Islamic or Jewish areas of the world, pork is not consumed. **Hinduism** forbids killing cows, which are considered sacred; therefore, in predominantly Hindu areas, beef is not consumed. When marketing internationally, a U.S. company that produces pork or beef products would need to know about these religious beliefs and the locations of these religious groups around the world.

Studying the cultural geography of an area can also provide background into why conflicts occur in different parts of the world. Many conflicts arise from ethnic, **ideological**, and religious differences between distinct groups within a country or in bordering countries. Knowing the location and population of the different groups within a region and their level of toleration for each other can aid in

understanding trouble spots around the world. Perhaps, too, is knowledge can help predict and even prevent conflicts.

ECONOMIC GEOGRAPHY

Economic geography focuses on how people make a living in different parts of the world and the distribution of types of economic activities throughout the world. Types of economic activities include agriculture (raising crops and livestock), mining, lumbering, fishing, manufacturing (processing raw materials into machinery, vehicles, chemicals, textiles, paper products, food products, etc.), services (activities that do not produce a product but provide a service like banking, retail, education, tourism, etc.), and high-technology industries involved in information collection and processing (like computer and software development, telecommunications, simulation, and **automation**).

Studying the economic activities of an area can explain its wealth and the standard of living of its people. For example, an area that grows a crop and also has the capability to manufacture it into a food product for export will generally be wealthier than an area without manufacturing capability for its raw materials. In general, areas involved in technologically-advanced industries are the wealthiest, while areas in which people rely on subsistence farming (growing the minimum required to keep a group or family alive) are the poorest. Understanding the economies of different parts of the world is important in dealing with and trying to lessen economic inequalities. It is also important as investments in businesses and trade relationships are made worldwide.

POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY

Political geography focuses on the political behavior of countries. It examines boundaries established by countries on land,

claims by countries to parts of the oceans, relationships between different countries, differences in the government and administration of countries, and the causes of countries remaining intact or dissolving. Having a basic understanding of political geography is important as these countries conduct foreign relations and involve themselves in situations around the globe.

WHAT IS A REGION?

When studying geography, the Earth is often separated into regions. Regions are places grouped together because they possess one or more common characteristics. As with the various geographic specialties, characteristics used to categorize places into regions are physical (location, landscape, climate, etc.) and human (cultural, economic, political, etc.).

Depending upon the characteristic, a place can belong to many regions. Venezuela, for example, is considered *South American* (located on the continent of South America), *Caribbean* (having a coastline on the Caribbean Sea), *Latin American* (people from Middle and South America comprised of people whose native speech is of the Romance languages — French, Portuguese, and Spanish), and *developing* (characterized by low **per capita** income and less technological development due to social and economic conditions). Even Venezuela itself can be considered a region, since its boundaries enclose a specific political area.

Often, geography is discussed in terms of countries or continents, since they are familiar concepts. This text follows that pattern. In each of the following six lessons, a different continent is investigated. (**Note:** Antarctica is examined at the end of this lesson.) Each lesson explores important physical terrain features for the continent and shows political boundaries of the countries within the continent. Cultural, economic and, in

some cases, further physical information is provided for each country or for groups of countries considered regions within the continent.

Remember that geography is a way of organizing information spatially, so that you can picture physical locations and relate the distribution of certain characteristics across those locations. Therefore, as you read through the text, note similar characteristics between countries or areas on different continents. Then visualize a world map with areas containing a specific characteristic: where are the mountainous regions on Earth . . . desert regions . . . English-speaking areas . . . Islamic areas . . . underdeveloped areas, etc.? While the text takes the continent/country approach, it also provides you with information to put in global perspective the distribution of many other physical and human characteristics around the world. The next section provides an example of associating a physical characteristic (different climates) spatially across all continents.

BASIC CONCEPTS

Illustration 5.1.1 shows the locations of the continents (minus Antarctica) and the oceans of the world. Everything above the Equator (0° latitude) lies in the Northern Hemisphere, and everything below it lies in the Southern Hemisphere. Everything to the right of the Prime Meridian (0° longitude) lies in the Eastern Hemisphere, and everything to the left of it lies in the Western Hemisphere.

The Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn parallel the Equator at about 23.5° north and south, respectively. The Tropic of Cancer marks the farthest point north at which the sun can be seen directly overhead at noon. The sun

reaches its vertical position over this tropic on about June 21. This means that on that day, the Tropic of Cancer is the latitude closest to the sun. The Tropic of Capricorn marks the farthest point south that the sun can be seen directly overhead at noon. The sun reaches its vertical position over this tropic on about December 21. This means that on that day, the Tropic of Capricorn is the latitude closest to the sun.

For this reason, seasons in the Northern Hemisphere are opposite the seasons in the Southern Hemisphere. While people living north of the Equator are experiencing summer weather from June to September, people living south of the Equator are experiencing winter weather. Likewise, the Northern Hemisphere's winter runs from December to March, during the Southern Hemisphere's summer.

The Arctic Circle (about 66° N latitude) and the Antarctic Circle (about 66° S latitude) are centered on the North and South Poles, respectively. They mark the northern and southern regions in which there is at least one day when the sun never sets and one day when it never rises. For example, when the sun is overhead at the Tropic of Cancer, the North Pole is tilted toward the sun, and the Arctic Circle experiences 24 hours of daylight. The Antarctic Circle, however, experiences 24 hours of darkness because the South Pole is tilted away from the sun. The opposite occurs when the sun is overhead at the Tropic of Capricorn, with the Arctic Circle in darkness for 24 hours and the Antarctic Circle in sunlight for 24 hours.

The details of this discussion have been offered as an accurate explanation for why latitudes have such importance. However, the

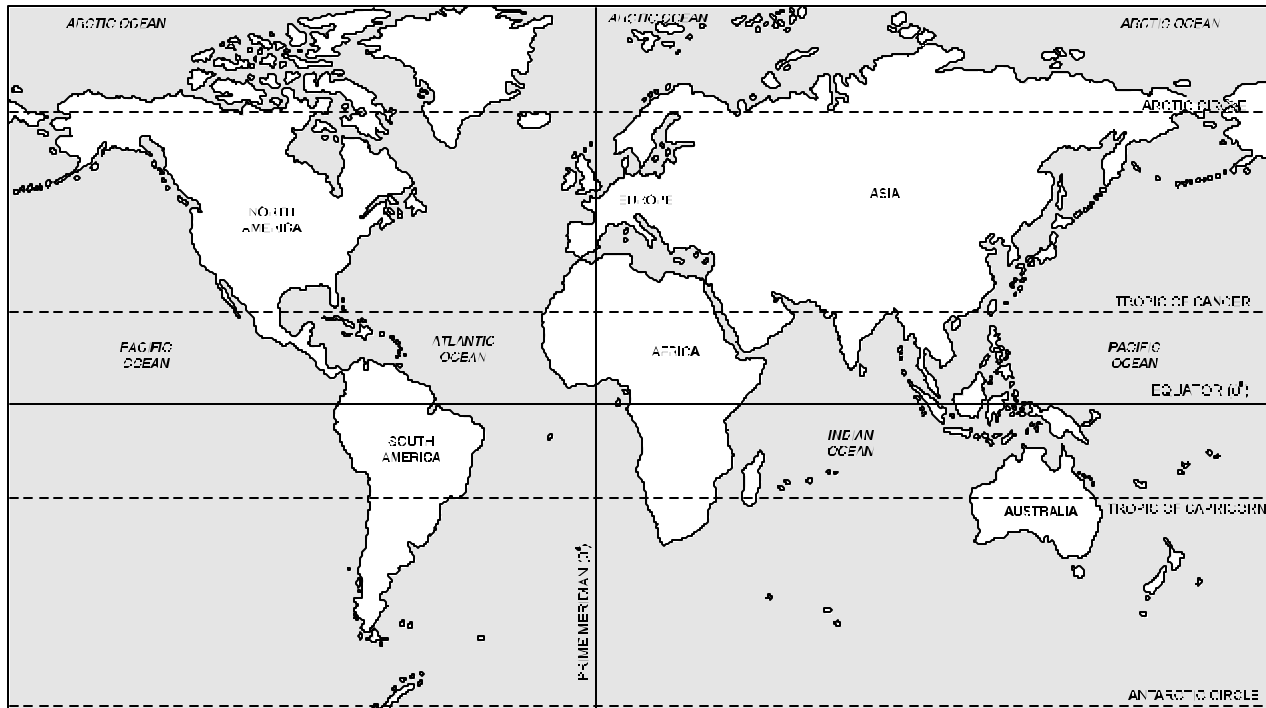


Illustration 5.1.1 — World Map

basic concepts that you should understand from this discussion are that the areas of the Earth between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn are closest to the sun. Conversely the areas of the Earth inside the Arctic and Antarctic Circles are the most distant from the sun.

CLIMATE

Several factors affect climate; among them are elevation and proximity to large bodies of water. Yet the most important factor is exposure to the sun, or solar radiation, which, as demonstrated in the previous discussion, is determined by latitude. The Equator at 0° latitude receives the most solar radiation, while the poles at 90° North and South latitude receive the least. Using the Equator, Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn, and the Arctic and Antarctic Circles as guides is a good way to develop a general perspective of basic world climates and the vegetation that grows naturally in an area due to climate.

Between the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn, tropical climates exist, characterized by hot temperatures throughout the year. Areas along the Equator get plenty of rain all year and the corresponding vegetation is tropical forest (jungle and rain forest). Moving away from the Equator are drought-resistant, tropical grasslands (savanna), particularly in South America, Africa, and Australia, with distinct wet and dry seasons. Moving still farther from the Equator to areas crossed by the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn are deserts and semi-deserts that get little or no rainfall. Exceptions include each continent's eastern coasts, which continue to get regular rainfall and have more tropical vegetation.

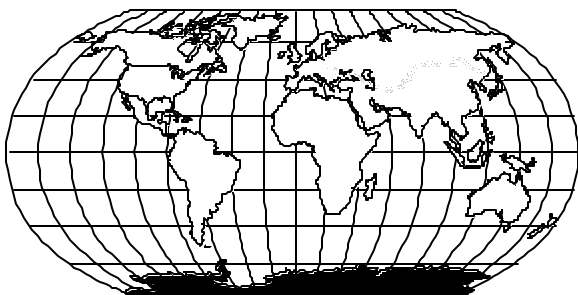
Between the Tropic of Cancer and the Arctic Circle as well as between the Tropic of Capricorn and the Antarctic Circle are areas of temperate (moderate) climate that have four seasons. Of course, areas located closer to the Arctic and Antarctic Circles have cooler summers and colder winters than most areas located closer to the tropics. Within this

temperate zone, much of Asia, Australia, and western North America receives little rainfall, but coastlines, eastern North America, and Europe receive plenty of rainfall. Temperate forests cover much of this area in the Northern Hemisphere, with temperate grasslands (prairies) on the interiors of continents, and deserts and semi-deserts in southwestern Asia and parts of central Asia.

Within the Arctic and Antarctic Circles is a polar climate marked by year-round cold weather and little moisture except in the form of snow. Most of the land is covered by tundra, a treeless, marshy plain of mosses on top of a permanently frozen subsoil. Much of the water is frozen; in fact, the Arctic Ocean, in which the North Pole (Illustration C) is located, is permanently frozen except around its edges.

Generally, people populate areas that have a temperate climate, fertile soil, and adequate rainfall for agriculture. In agreement with the above information concerning world climate, the more populated areas of the planet are southeastern North America, Europe, and south and Southeastern Asia. Desert areas and polar areas have few, if any, inhabitants.

ANTARCTICA



Since this section has already investigated the Antarctic Circle (Illustration 5.1.2), this is an opportune place to discuss the continent of Antarctica, which is located almost entirely within the Antarctic Circle. Antarctica, the fifth largest continent, surrounds the South Pole and is the coldest, iciest piece of land on

Earth. During the summer months (November to January) temperatures are usually no warmer than 0°F, and during the winter months (May to July) the average temperature is 270°F. The area is then in continual darkness, and there are dangerous blizzards.

Despite the harsh landscape of the continent, several countries have claimed parts of Antarctica because of its rich supply of natural resources. Minerals and fuels lie beneath its surface, and large schools of fish inhabit its waters. Only Marie Byrd Land remains unclaimed. For now, a 1959 treaty prohibits military activities, nuclear explosions, and disposal of radioactive waste on the continent, and as of 1991, there is a ban on mineral extraction and mining.

CONCLUSION

Geography looks at both the physical and human landscapes of our planet. It encompasses a broad range of topics, including the specialties of physical, cultural, economic, and political geography. The following lessons discuss these four aspects of geography using the familiar concepts of continents and countries as a framework. As similar characteristics between places worldwide are revealed throughout this text, visualize the distribution of those characteristics across the globe. Possessing the skills to organize information in this spatial way and to understand both the physical and human landscapes of our planet is essential to being a geographically informed person in our global environment.

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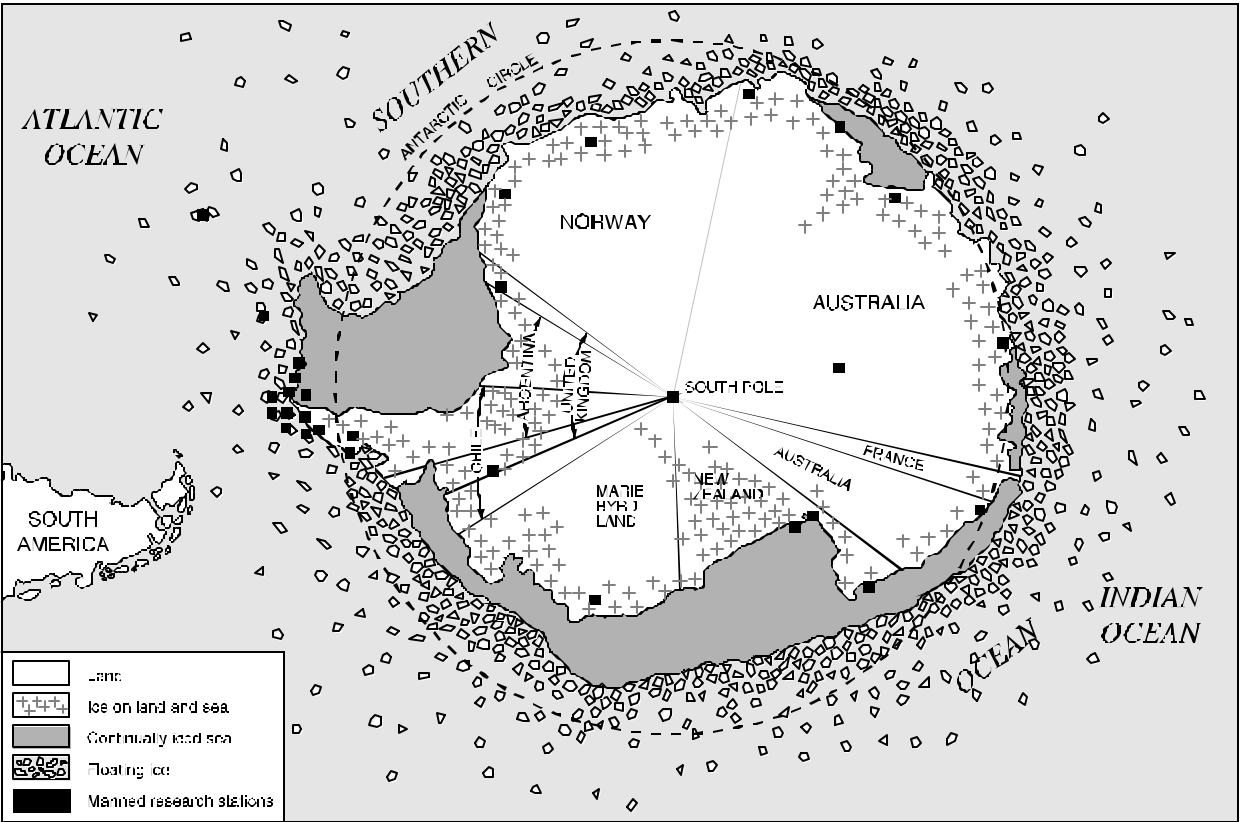


Illustration 5.1.2 — Antarctica